

ANNUAL REPORT: THE DJANAVARA HILL PROJECT: EXCAVATIONS OF AN EARLY BYZANTINE MONASTERY AT VARNA, BULGARIA 2019 FIELD SCHOOL

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At the end of a very successful archaeological season and field school

The Djanavara monastery archaeological field school 2019 took place in Varna, Bulgaria (ancient Odessos) on the Black Sea coast from July 22nd to August 19th. The excavation project was hosted by the Varna Regional Museum of History, Department of Archaeology, and for a sixth season this was conducted in successful partnership with the Balkan Heritage foundation (2009, 2010, 2011, 2017, 2018 and 2019).

The Early Christian monastic complex is located on Djanavara hill, 7 km south from the old town of Varna. It consists of a monumental single-nave church with four additional premises, presumably with towers on top of them. The building differs from the traditional Early Christian church architecture in the Balkan provinces of the Roman Empire, and some of the characteristics could be explained by Near Eastern influence.

The church was excavated for the first time in the early 20th C. Then it was re-excavated in the late 90's, and on a larger scale since 2007, in order to collect additional and more precise archaeological information about the site.

In the last 11 years a large complex around the church has been partly uncovered. An atrium with colonnades, a back yard and buildings with several different construction periods have also been discovered. The complex dates from the mid-5th C. and existed until the early 7th C. With its size, monumentality and luxurious decoration with marble and mosaics, the Djanavara monastery is one of the most representative of its kind in the Balkans. The monastery is famous also with the set of three reliquaries made of marble, silver and gold found in a crypt under the altar.

The scientific tasks during the 2019 excavation and field school were a logical continuation of the discoveries from the previous archaeological seasons. The efforts of the team this year were focused in two specific areas –in the southwestern and western sectors of the monastery. The first working area covered the southern part of the two-story building adjacent to the southern wall of the atrium, and also the area to the south from it. The two-story building communicated with the courtyard through a kind of portico. The row of irregular bases (made of stones and broken bricks) suggest that most probably, the portico had wooden supports and the whole construction was not well built or particularly representative. Several sewer channels and a clay water pipe pass under the courtyard coming from south. Therefore, we could expect to find another building located there, closing the courtyard from that side.

The second area was in the western portico of the atrium, where the main gate should have stood. Unfortunately, this part of the building was severely damaged and most of the masonry robbed away to the foundation level. No remains from the gate itself have been found, but at least some information was collected about the architecture of the so-called western portico. A large amount of pottery and small artifacts (coins, clay and glass lamps, iron objects, etc.) were found during the field school, thus giving the students an idea about the everyday life of residents in the complex.

The 2019 excavation and field school season provided all of the participants with valuable fieldwork and finds processing experience. Under the guidance and supervision of their instructors, the students took part in all activities on the field: digging, measuring, field documentation (photography, graphic documentation, context sheets, bag labels, etc.), and initial finds processing (sorting and cleaning).

After the intensive fieldwork in season 2019 a considerable quantity of archaeological material and documentation was collected. It will be processed in the forthcoming months by the Djanavara excavation team and affiliated specialists. The results of the excavations will be presented to the public during the annual archaeological reports of the Bulgarian National Institute of Archaeology in February/March 2020, and an article will be published in the annual edition of the Institute – Archaeological Discoveries and Excavations (in 2019).